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NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/YERGER/HARDING

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [PARM](#) [SY](#) [IS](#) [LE](#)

SUBJECT: LEBANON: PM SINIORA TELLS A/S WELCH "I CANNOT DO THIS ALONE."

REF: A. BEIRUT 1973

[1](#)B. BEIRUT 1978

Classified By: Charge d'Affairs William Grant for Reasons: Section 1.4
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) Prime Minister Siniora was grateful to receive a debrief on NEA Assistant Secretary David Welch's return visit to Lebanon. Speaking during the evening of December 19, A/S Welch and DAPNSA Elliott Abrams reiterated U.S. support for March 14 and the democratic processes in Lebanon. They advised PM Siniora to keep pressure on the March 8 opposition parties by refusing to give into their demands for further concessions. They also stressed the importance of internal discipline and public unity for March 14 members in the days and weeks ahead. When pressed for an answer on the U.S. proposed plan of action, A/S Welch mentioned that the President will be able to discuss Lebanon's precarious situation with Arab leaders during his January 2009 visit to the region.

[1](#)2. (C) A/S Welch said he would be working closely with Embassy Beirut to monitor and evaluate GOL requests for support to avoid a financial crisis in Lebanon. He also said the U.S. would work with Turkey, Russia, and the European nations to increase pressure on Turkey. "However, USG support does not extend to the brokering of a deal," cautioned A/S Welch. PM Siniora was grateful for the promised actions, saying, "I cannot do this alone. We need your support for Lebanon's young democracy." End Summary.

MOVING FORWARD

[1](#)3. (C) A/S Welch and Deputy National Security Advisor Elliott Abrams met with PM Fouad Siniora at the Grand Serail on December 19. Charge Bill Grant, NEA Staff Assistant, Siniora's Advisors Mohamad Chatah and Rola Nouredine, and Emboffs also attended the meeting. Siniora said it was good that Secretary Rice had not come to Beirut: "The time was not right. Her presence here would have done no good." A/S Welch said the President's upcoming trip to the region would provide an excellent opportunity for high-level conversations with Arab leaders on the crisis in Lebanon.

[1](#)4. (C) Chatah seemed to take over the role of blunt questioner in this meeting, repeatedly asking A/S Welch and

DAPNSA Abrams what concrete actions the U.S. was planning to take to support Lebanon. A/S Welch replied that the U.S. would work with Turkey and Russia to examine ways to put pressure on Syria. Russia, in particular, seemed disillusioned by Syria. DAPNSA Abrams also said that he would work to make sure the Europeans "got serious" about their sanctions on Syria. Both A/S Welch and DAPNSA Abrams said they would return to Washington to consider what other unilateral measures could be developed to both support March 14 and also put pressure on the March 8 opposition and Syria. A/S Welch said he would also be working closely with Embassy Beirut to monitor and evaluate GOL requests for support to avoid a financial crisis in Lebanon.

15. (C) Siniora outlined his plan to submit a draft law directly to parliament to amend the constitution if a president is not elected on December 22, the next scheduled parliamentary session. "The time to elect LAF Commander Michel Sleiman is now," said Siniora. He did not know how Speaker Berri would respond to such a move, but said, "We have to stop barking at each other. If the paralysis continues, the public will get sick of all of us and give both March 8 and March 14 the boot." Publicly and privately, Siniora has been spreading the same message on behalf of March 14. "My hand is extended to the opposition, but I am firm - no more concessions." He was equally adamant about the legitimacy of his cabinet. "The opposition has no right to make the government resign, even though they are trying to seize this right through parliamentary maneuvers."

REQUEST FOR SUPPORT

16. (C) Siniora said he also is trying to garner international

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support. He mentioned a recent conversation with Egyptian President Mubarak, who responded positively to the idea of a boycott of the Syrian-hosted Arab League Summit in March 2008 if the crisis in Lebanon is not resolved. In Siniora's opinion, the Arab countries cannot solve this crisis alone. More international support is needed.

17. (C) PM Siniora also expressed his concern about Lebanon's financial stability. "This is our Achilles heel," he said. He asked for U.S. financial support for the Central Bank, which must refinance a large portion of its debt in the months to come (Ref A).

18. (C) Returning to his role as the blunt inquisitor, Chatah asked if there were any international or regional initiatives coming in the next few months that could impact Lebanon. "Annapolis really affected us. Are there any more initiatives involving Syria and Iran in the near future?" asked Chatah. "We need to be able to manage our own environment." A/S Welch and DAPNSA Abrams responded that during the next few months, much of the work towards peace would involve bilateral, low-key meetings between the Israelis and Palestinians. The next big international event would likely be the Arab League Summit in March.

18. (C) Chatah went on to ask how the Special Tribunal might affect Syrian actions towards Lebanon. A/S Welch said that he cannot predict the SARG reaction until the Tribunal reports become public. The U.S. does not know if UNIIIC has enough evidence to pursue formal prosecutions. A/S Welch did predict serious internal problems for the SARG if UNIIIC can concretely link Syrian officials to the assassinations in Lebanon.

Message to March 14 Christians

19. (C) A/S Welch briefed Siniora on his meeting earlier that day with March 14 Christian leaders (Ref B). Siniora deemed the meeting very useful and was pleased the turnout had been

so high. A/S Welch told Siniora that he had spoken frankly with the group about their internal problems and the steps they would need to take to strengthen the March 14 alliance. In a private meeting, A/S Welch had told former President Amine Gemayel the U.S. is committed to supporting the Christians in Lebanon. Gemayel is still hesitant about personally joining a new cabinet, A/W Welch reported, but may agree to designate a member of his party to participate. Siniora, clearly interested in getting Gemayal to agree, said if someone else were suggested, he would have to be convinced that the individual in question provides "value-added" to the government.

A Personal Plea

¶10. (C) As he is sometimes prone to do when in an expansive mood, PM Siniora launched into a folk story about a lone soldier named Tannous who faced insurmountable odds. Siniora compared himself to this soldier, saying he continues his work in the face of great personal risk. "I face the challenges with a great deal of determination, but I cannot do it alone," said Siniora. "You shouldn't have to," replied A/S Welch, assuring Siniora that his courage was widely respected by decision-makers in Washington. Describing Lebanon as a "country that bounces when given the chance," Siniora asked for the political and financial support to help Lebanon make it through this difficult time.

¶11. A/S Welch has not cleared this cable.

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